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Tracksters Focus on NCAAs

BY GAVIN OFF AND CHRIS RICHTER
 Staff Writers

They've been out of the blocks for more than a month now.

But in March, the North Carolina men's and women's track teams will move their acts outdoors, leaving the Eddie Smith Fieldhouse for the Irwin Belk Track.

The Tar Heel men, who last year finished fourth in the ACC and 57th at nationals, might not have the depth necessary to dethrone conference champion Clemson. But UNC dresses enough top performers to make its mark at nationals.

"I think we have a chance to be a top-10 NCAA team," said UNC coach Dennis Craddock. "As far as quality athletes, we have just as many as any team in the ACC. We have a lot of good people, but not a lot of depth."

Craddock said a team needs 10 elite athletes to do well at nationals and 25 to win the conference.

And Craddock's squads are looking for elite athletes to establish themselves in the long-distance events while trying to atone for a poor cross-country season.

"I think this fall we really under-achieved in cross-country," said senior distance runner Matt Weiss. "That's enough motivation for most people to really want to refocus themselves."

Two groups of Tar Heels that don't need much refocusing are the jumpers and the throwers.

Ian Douglas, a team captain and conference champion in the shot put, is one of UNC's top hammer and discus throwers.

The school's record holder in the hammer throw, Sal Gigante placed in the top three at the ACCs in the hammer, discus and shot put last year.

Despite comprising the Tar Heels' strongest squad, Gigante said the throwers don't feel any additional burden to perform well.



Sophomore runner **Shalane Flanagan** earned outdoor All-American honors in the 1,500 meters last season.

"I don't think we feel pressure," he said. "We just want to come out and compete the best we can."

The Tar Heel women are looking forward to getting outdoors, where they won the ACC championship in 2001.

"I'm more passionate toward outdoors," said UNC sophomore distance runner Shalane Flanagan. "I run faster times outdoors."

Flanagan earned outdoor All-American honors in the 1,500 meters as a freshman and was named ACC

Freshman of the Year.

Flanagan and fellow All-Americans Bobbie Jo Munson and Alice Schmidt are the top returning distance runners in outdoor competition.

"Everyone picks it up a notch (outdoors)," Munson said. "The intensity picks up. Everyone seems to be running faster."

Anissa Gainey, Edi Ntuen and Tiffany Flomo will lead the UNC women sprinters and hurdlers. In the 2001 ACC Championships, Gainey placed second in the 100, while Ntuen and Flomo took third and fourth, respectively, in the 400.

In throws, the team will feature junior Ibe Bilaye-Benibo and 2001 NCAA qualifier Jill Pedretti.

Pedretti finished second in the ACC in the javelin and 17th at the NCAAs in the discus.

"I had a poor performance last year," Pedretti said. "I hope to redeem myself this year. The last two years, I let the competition get to me. If I just do what I did to get there, I can be an All-American."

One of the best middle distance teams in the nation and a strong throwing squad make Craddock confident that the Tar Heels will make another run for the championship.

Most of the team's stars have returned, and Craddock said while there isn't a lot of experience, the talent runs deep.

"We won the championship with depth and a total team effort," Craddock said.

"The middle and longer distance runners are better. We're young in jumps and in sprints, but they have an indoor season under their belts. We don't really have any weak areas with the women."

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